



# A JOURNEY FROM AGNOSTICISM TO AFFIRMATION: A STUDY OF ANITA NAIR'S THE BETTER MAN AND KIRAN DESAI'S THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS

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## ABSTRACT

From the womb till the tomb mankind is on a continuous search either for worldly gains or for something indefinable. Despite the advancement in the social life, which has increased pleasure and comfort, the contemporary man finds himself in tragic mess. In advanced modern societies man is essentially alienated because he has under the possession of mechanism beyond his understanding and control. A person's concomitant journey towards self-realization or soul-searching has become prominent theme in contemporary literature. Like the recent eminent writers from India Anita Nair & Kiran Desai exemplify the issues of self-examination and the exploration of inner dimension of a man. Their works realize not only the quest for self-searching but the search for one's roots in modern world. Having found no hope, no answer to the bewildering questions regarding their existence, their characters look into their searching soul. Thus, the aim of the present paper is to examine their characters journey from agnosticism to affirmation or self-consciousness.

**KEY WORDS:** self-realization, the better man, loss of self and recovery, self-consciousness, search for enlightenment.

Both Anita Nair and Kiran Desai are the most promising, aspiring writers of contemporary arena of Indian literature, the unique fragment flowers of Indian writings. India has been always producing such great award winning authors or inspiring other writers to base their works on Indian colour, themes and identity. Indian women novelists of new decade have given a new dimension to the Indian English fiction. In their works, they deal with the latest burning issues of modern society like the psychological suffering or the frustrated life of a man. They are primarily focusing on the psychological exploration of inner mind.

From aspiring to be a psychiatrist to almost being sure of becoming a journalist, to finding a hold in the world of advertising, to actually becoming a writer- Anita Nair has come a long way. Having bidden goodbye to her advertising career, she opted to concentrate on her writing. In the context of contemporary Indian writings in English, she is one of the most understated yet confident voices exploring the individual and universal predicaments through her characters psyche. In her novels, she has concentrated more on characters rather than social milieu. Her characters are not types, but individual men and women, the solitary beings- who have treated, or driven into some extremity of despair, and so turned against or made to stand against the general current of life. Her characters are independent, agonised, frustrated somewhat domineering combats with angry defiance, their individual problems and predicaments, which are basically existentialist. Likewise, Kiran Desai, one of the most brilliant creative writers of modern India who is known for her Booker Prize winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), explores the interior landscape of the minds of characters rather than the political and social realities. For her, writings is an effort to discover, and then to underline, and finally convey the true significance of things. She combines in herself the naturalness of Tolstoy and the depth and resonance of Dickens laced with post-modern ambivalence. She presents a situation where one's society keeps on changing day by day. Her characters steadily march from self-alienation to self-discovery, from sickness to health, neurosis to normalcy.

Both Anita Nair and Kiran Desai are the user of psychological fiction, go into depth in characters psychological mind and bring to light their issues. Some of their novels have similar patterns and stories, and deal issues like loss of self and recovery, realization and redemption, and self-consciousness of characters. For exploring the treatment of these common themes, we pick up here Anita Nair's *The Better Man* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*.

*The Better Man* (2000) Anita Nair's debut novel, which is tipped her as one of the better young writers of the time, set in cotemporary India in a little fictitious village, called Kaikurussi, in Northern part of Kerala. *The Better Man* describes by Indian Review of Books as-

*"A first novel of great promise----- Kaikurussi, one tea shop town, somewhere in Kerala, comes alive with Nair's pen-----Doesn't ponder to prefabricated audiences or juries and conforms only to its own contours".*

*The Better Man* features Mukundan Nair, who wants to become a man like his father Achuthan Nair, a respected person of the whole village. Though Mukundan may be a bachelor nearing sixty, but he is as timid as a child. He is like a puppet in the hands of his dominating father. In his childhood, he wants to become a writer like Charles Dickens, his favourite author but when his Father

knows, he says-

*"Let me tell you, boy, banish that thought from your mind. No son of mine is going to waste his life trying to be a writer." (p.16)*

Achuthan Nair ruined the life of Mukundan and his mother with his rude, authoritative and dominating behaviour. He tortured him to become a perfect man. So Mukundan always haunted by a sense of failure for not measuring up to the expectations of his domineering father. The story of the novel unfolds with returns of Mukundan to his ancestral village after the retirement. Back to his ancestral home, he is continually tormented by the memories of his dead mother, Puru kutty. Her final words surfaced his thoughts and he often reminded her final words:

*"Take me with you, son. I am so unhappy here". (p.31)*

Mukundan felt desperate while his mother uttered-

*"Where were you when I needed you? You could have rescued me, but you choose not to". (p.31)*

His dead mother's soul is haunting him every night in his dream till he meets his friend Bhasi, a painter. Though Bhasi has a postgraduate degree in English Language and Literature but in the very opening lines of the novel, he clearly shows his passion for painting with a description of the village Kaikurussi. Bhasi cures the villagers with the herbs grown in the backyard of his house and also with the help of psychopathy. He reads Mukundan's face and decides to help him.

Mukundan also begins an impassioned affair with an unhappily married woman, Anjana, a twenty-two years old lady. She is not fully divorced yet, but Mukundan is willing to risk the social faux pas, until he is invited to Power House Ramkrishnan's house for a meeting of the Community Hall Committee. Power House is the richest man in the village, having won the lottery, and he wants to seize Bhasi's land to put up a community hall. As he wants Bhasi's removal from his village. Mukundan is flattered by so much importance and feels that this is his achievement which his father expected from him, and he becomes ready to sacrifice even his friendship with Bhasi for it. Due to his illusionary reputation, he denies to get married to Anjana, who is much younger than him.

Mukundan decides to spend the rest of his life cocooned in that magical happiness. But when his greatest desire to take his father's place in Kaikurussi is threatened, he feels that his greed for recognition and acceptance left him alone. Now he has all the villagers but no one in true sense. He thinks deeply and finds himself not better than what his father had been. Earlier he feels that 'to love someone is to enter a solitary world'. But now he realises that his selfish behaviour towards his friend and beloved left him incapable of loyalty and love. Now he is full of guilt and regret, and decides to do now what he feels right. He also says:

*"All my life I wanted to be my father's equal. But now I want more. I want to be better than him. I want to know what it is to love and to give. And in turn, be loved". (p. 354)*

Then he visits Anjana, pleads her to forgive his mistakes and accept him again. He promises her that he will come to take her with him the day after pooram. He wants everyone to see that he loves Anjana. On the night of the Pooram festival when all the villagers were gathered on the temple ground, the village was empty. Mukundan blasts the community hall with the gun powder. Thus, by exploding the community hall, he destroys his past.

Likewise, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), the Man Booker prize winning novel of Kiran Desai portrays such characters as are dislocated in one way or the other. In this novel, there are different types of displaced people. Some characters are experiencing the pain of exile in America when few are enjoying the pleasure of being immigrants in the sub-continent. Their achievements and frustrations reside side by side. In both cases they face identity crises after a certain period of time in their life in exile. Desai completely explores these crises and disorientation in the formation of cultural, national and linguistic identity. The entire narrative unveils the efforts of the various characters to attain in a better understanding and meaning of their 'self'.

The story is basically centred on two main characters, Biju and Sai. Biju is an illegal immigrant living in the United States. He is the son of a cook working for Sai's maternal grandfather. Sai is an Anglicised Indian girl living in mountainous Kalimpong with Jemubhai Patel, who is a retired Cambridge educated judge. Sai is romantically involved with her Maths tutor Gyan, the descendent of a Nepali Gorkhaland Movement. He eventually recoils from love and joins a group of ethnic Nepalese insurgents.

Sai's grandfather, Jemubhai Patel is a retired judge, an Anglophile kind of personality. He is not accepted in either the British or the Indian life. So, he loses his faith and identity.

*"He envied the English. He loathed Indians. He worked at being English with the passion of hatred and for what he would become, he would be despised by absolutely everyone, English and Indians both". (p.119)*

He is closer to his dog Mutt rather than his cook and other people. His departures from India to Europe for studies could not cover his emotional loss. He loses to the taste of life and human emotions, sentiments and behaviour. Life seems to be totally meaningless and useless; everything becomes agonizing and disgusting to him.

The story of Sai Mistry, alternates with that of Biju, an illegal immigrant trying to find work and a better life in New York. The novel shows the internal conflicts in India between past and present. There is the rejection and yet awe of the English way of life, the opportunities for money in the U.S., and the squalor of living in India. Many leading Indians are considered to be becoming too English and having forgotten the traditional ways of Indian life. Gyan is also in dilemma of to be or not to be. He cannot deceive Sai and also want to join Freedom Movement of Gorkha Liberation Front. Gyan thinks that Sai is a part of the upper westernized Indian class and this class is responsible for the brutal condition of the Nepalese. He is frustrated when he realizes the contradictions.

The novel deals with the emotional and intellectual losses of the characters, as the title of the novel reflects. Almost all the characters in the novel lose something while seeking for money or emancipation from exploitation in the nation state. Though, many characters of the novel lose, but novel ends on a promising note of hope and desire. The entire narrative discloses the efforts of the various characters to achieve a better understanding and meaning of their self. Story Samantha remarks in his review-

*"Characters battle not only with the loss of their freedom and homes but also with the loss of identity".*

Thus, it is observed that through both the narratives, the novelists are critical about the politics of liberalization, characters are bound together by a shared historical legacy and a common experience of impotence and humiliation. Every major character in the narratives faces loss of emotion, loss of self-consciousness. Both the novels describe the breakdown of a traditional social order, and highlighting the alienation or isolation between one individual and another. Both the novelists depict the real picture of human lives, a saga of the marginalised souls and the self-exploration of characters truly. Every character in these narratives goes through losses, realization and redemption in his/her life.

It seems that both the novelists are trying to portray the same thing in their novels. As both Rushdie and Rohinton Mistry believes that, with this her second novel Desai has secured her place with the great contemporary Indian authors exploring life and society in India and elsewhere. Salman Rushdie has earlier described- *The Inheritance of Loss* is a majestic novel, "illuminating the pain of exile, the ambiguities of post colonialism and the blinding dereliction for 'better life' when one person's wealth means another's poverty".

- (Rushdie, Salman: *On the Inheritance of Loss*)

In the words of Abraham Verges, author of *My Own Country*, *The Better Man* is-

*"In a deeper insight into the novel unfolds the various themes of search for*

*Identity, exploitation, gender discrimination and disintegration in the society, cultural differences, man- woman relationship, and the power of the lands in the lives of the people and so on".*

In Anita Nair's *The Better Man*, Mukundan comes out of the pot of illusion, he hit and smashes it into the pieces. He realizes that two loving souls are more important to him than the whole world.

*"He could separate himself endlessly so that he could be anything he wanted to be, a new man, a new life. Afraid no longer, capable of so much more than he had ever dreamed of" (p. 198-199)*

Likewise, Biju's return from America might be considered as the symbol of the failure of American dream, less importance is too given to humanity and sentiments of the people. Biju also realizes that money is not everything. He doesn't feel any kind of discomfort leaving behind the great empire of luxury. "Now he promised himself, he would forget this insight, began anew". And "In the mirror of this bathroom, Biju saluted himself." (p.286). Now he feels free and happy from all the problems. When he comes to India he has to face many problems, in his motherland, on the way of Kalimpong. Still he is eager to meet his father as quick as possible. "Biju played the scene of meeting his father again and again like a movie in his head" (p.286). Though he loses all his things but the breath of freedom he feels in India is amazing. He moves from disappointment to the emancipation of soul. Like the Judge, he develops identity dilemma due to his outcast status in the western community. However, Biju's dilemma makes him realize the greatness of his native roots and he becomes optimistic.

To sum up, both the novelists have taken up the themes of- loss of self-esteem, alienation, frustration, cultural differences, and search for self-identity. Both of them have portrayed the dilemma of up rooted individuals through their novels brilliantly. Generally, they describe their characters transformative journey from agnosticism to affirmation, fortifying one's faith in man's ability to survive as man.

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